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My Darkest Hour

BY VJOHNSON – APRIL 17, 2014
POSTED IN: FEATURES

By Ensign Joshua Faulkner, Registered Nurse, Naval Hospital Pensacola

April is Donor Awareness Month and the following is my account of how a donor forever changed my family.



Trenton Faulkner, 14, is surrounded by his family, including his father Ensign Joshua Faulkner, a registered nurse at Naval Hospital Pensacola, as he waits for a liver donor late in 2013. A donor match was found and Trenton made a full recovery. Joshua shared his son's story to raise awareness on the impact donors can have. (Photo courtesy of Naval Hospital Pensacola)

The minutes seemed like hours as my mind and body were finally succumbing to all that was happening. The reality that my son was closer to death than life had finally set in and the enormity of the moment seemed to sit directly on my chest like a heavy weight. How had this happened?

Just six days earlier, life was totally normal and the thought that my 14-year-old son Trenton would soon be fighting for his life had never crossed my mind. He had complained of a mild stomach ache that weekend, but by Monday morning he was up and ready for school. Halfway into the school day I received his text, "Dad my eyes are yellow." Being a registered nurse, I immediately drove to the school knowing that if this was true, a trip to Naval Hospital Pensacola's Emergency Room would be required. As he walked into the front office, the yellow hue of his eyes was obvious.

The lab work revealed that his liver was not working correctly. His liver enzymes were elevated and the many functions of the body sustained by the liver were reflecting its weakened state. Knowing the potential for complications, NHP immediately transferred him to one of the local hospitals to ensure that the potential services that may be required would be available. I didn't know it then, but this was just one of many time critical decisions that allowed my son to have a chance to fight for his life.

After two days it became apparent that Trent's condition was not improving. The medical team felt it was now necessary to airlift Trent to a children's hospital in Atlanta. They informed us that he would be admitted into the transplant unit. I believe this was the first time the full severity of the situation truly dawned on us as a family.

For two more days we sat with Trent hoping for the best, but were helpless to watch as his condition continued to deteriorate. He slept more and more, his skin yellow and swollen from the toxins accumulating in his body. Finally, the doctors entered Trent's hospital room and told us that the damage to his liver had reached a point of no return



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and that without an immediate transplant, he would die.

I looked at Trent as the doctors exited the room and for the first time I saw fear. I asked the obvious, “Are you scared?” That little acknowledgement of what he was feeling was all it took for him to finally release the tears that he was fighting so hard to hold back. My wife and I cried with him, and I struggled to mutter the words, “It’s going to be okay.” I wanted to do nothing more in that moment than to be able to take away his fear and ease his heart, but I could not think of the proper words to comfort my son.

About 12 hours later, the doctors came with the first good news we had heard all week. They informed us that they had been contacted with a potential donor match, and that a team of doctors was already in route to assess the donor liver to ensure that it would be a viable organ for Trent. I cannot describe the feelings that I felt in that moment. I felt a sense of relief and hope for sure knowing that my son would have a chance to survive, but I also felt a very real awareness that somewhere someone had lost their life. A family had made a difficult decision to donate life while grieving the loss of their loved one.

The minutes seemed like hours. Finally at 3 a.m., the ICU nurse came to tell us that the liver had arrived, and they would be wheeling Trent to the operating room.

After six hours from the beginning of the procedure, the surgeon walked into the waiting room still wearing his scrubs. He slowly pulled up a nearby chair and sat down in front of my family. My heart was in my throat as we waited for him to give us the news.

“It went great,” he explained. “Everything worked out perfectly.”

Sitting at home now, some five months post-transplant, the enormity of the gift given to my family by our donor family becomes more evident daily. Every memory made and cherished by each of us with Trent is a blessing, granted by someone’s decision to donate life. I have since watched Trent return to school, play with his sisters and begin playing baseball. I don’t know if I could ever express in words how much these moments mean to me, or how appreciative I will forever be to my son’s donor and their family.



Trenton Faulkner poses with his father Ensign Joshua Faulkner, a registered nurse at Naval Hospital Pensacola, during Joshua’s commissioning ceremony May 19, 2012. Trenton was an active and healthy child until he was suddenly in need of a liver transplant. Thanks to a donor, Trenton has made a full recovery. (Photo courtesy of Naval Hospital Pensacola)

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